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The military's first tri-service joint base has one more institutional division to overcome: different pay scales on either side of the Ocean-Burlington county line, and civilian employees must get paid the same for doing the same work regardless of where they're located, Rep. John Adler, D-N.J., said Thursday.

About 2,600 engineers, firefighters, mechanics and other civilian workers at Fort Dix and McGuire Air Force Base, get paid substantially less than their counterparts at Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, Adler told reporters in a telephone news conference. Legislation sponsored by Adler and other New Jersey congressmen would bring worker pay up to the base levels paid at lakehurst, for an annual estimated increase of \$3 million in the civilian payroll, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The difference arises because the Department of Defense uses pay differentials, based on the cost of living in nearby metropolitan areas. Lakehurst and Ocean County fall within the system's New York area, while McGuire and Dix lie mostly in Burlington County and the Philadelphia metro region, according to an analysis issued by Adler's office.

There's a nearly 7 percent difference in base pay, according to the report. For a worker making GS-7 base pay, that's \$40,591 a year at McGuire or Dix, compared to \$42,837 across the county line at McGuire, the report says.

Compared to the Burlington County bases, Lakehurst has a much higher proportion of civilian workers and many of them are in higher-paid engineering and research positions, developing and testing equipment and computer software for the Navy's aircraft carrier fleet.

The pay report also makes a case that bringing the joint base pay scales up to the New York metro region differential could make it possible for New Jersey to retain more workers from Fort Monmouth, who otherwise may be forced to choose to follow their old jobs to Maryland as a result of the 2005 base realignment.

"Approximately 5,400 jobs will be relocated to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland, rather than remaining in South Jersey," the report notes. "Although there are jobs at the new joint base for some of these employees, they cannot afford to live in their current homes and receive the lower (Philadelphia) locality pay that is currently applied to most of the jobs at the joint base."

As of Oct. 1, all three bases are coming under unified administrative control of the Air Force's

87th Air Base Wing, a new command headed by Col. Gina Grosso that will take care of all the physical plant operations at the joint base, from policing the gates to fixing the plumbing.

The Army Reserve, Navy and Air Force will retain direct control over their commands on the base, but support workers such as civil engineers will become Air Force employees.

The Department of Defense could make base pay levels conform through its own administrative processes but that would take years, compared to doing it through the Congressional appropriations process, Adler said. If the bill, HR-2714 is approved, Department of Defense officials would offset the estimated \$3 million payroll increase through savings elsewhere in the defense budget, he said.

The measure is co-sponsored by Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., whose district includes Lakehurst; Reps. Rob Andrews and Rush Holt, D-N.J.; and Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-N.J.